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ABSTRACT

Arguing that the community college is a critical institution for students of color, representing hope, opportunity, and often a last chance to succeed, this essay poses and responds to a number of questions concerning the community college's role in promoting minority transfer. First, the essay summarizes the positions of policymakers, university-based researchers, and community college leaders regarding the colleges' effectiveness/ineffectiveness in fulfilling the transfer function. Next, the following questions are raised, the implications and roots of the questions critiqued, and answers provided based on research data and personal opinions: (1) Why should community colleges be singled out for producing few transfer students and exhibiting low retention rates if these problems are being faced by all institutions of higher education? (2) Why can't students be satisfied with earning associate degrees, especially in tech-prep programs of study that lead to high-paying jobs? (3) Why should we worry about low transfer rates when naive community college students cannot be trusted with stating their aspirations? (4) Isn't it a mistake to say that vocational-technical programs confine students to a sub-baccalaureate track? (5) Why should we force students to transfer if students are adults and responsible for their own choices? (6) Shouldn't we be careful about producing too many bachelor's degrees in an already over-educated society? and (7) Isn't it difficult and almost impossible to improve transfer rates, given the existence of multiple functions in community colleges? (JMC)

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EYES ON THE PRIZE:
STUDENTS OF COLOR AND THE BACHELOR'S DEGREE

Laura I. Rendon

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EYES ON THE PRIZE: STUDENTS OF COLOR AND THE BACHELOR'S DEGREE

Laura I. Rendón

As a researcher who has taken on the challenge of examining retention and transfer issues in community colleges, I often find that I am the target of criticism. Some of my university colleagues often wonder why I have taken on such a seemingly thankless job: "Why do you study community colleges? I mean, who cares?" Others are only a bit kinder: "You must really care about community colleges. No respectable researcher would study community colleges." On the other side of this form of academic elitism are defensive remarks made by two-year college administrators and some university researchers who study community colleges. At one conference where I reported the results of my research on transfer students to community college faculty and administrators, I was told that I should be more careful in reporting my findings, for if I continued to report "negative findings," I would not get invited to make any more conference presentations. During the past few years, I have been told that I "misrepresented data," "presented a skewed picture of community college transfer students," and "failed to review research findings that are more positive about transfer." I have even been referred to as "just one of those university researchers who does not really understand what community colleges are all about." The fact is that the two-year college community has always been nervous about transfer. Yet, my task here is not to chide my professional colleagues. As a researcher, it is my role to seek empirical information about what is happening to students as they flow through the nation's educational system. I am particularly interested in the academic experience of students of color and how institutions impede or facilitate their academic progress. And I am especially

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concerned about why large numbers of minority students leave college and fail to transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions.

The purpose of this editorial essay is to present a case for why increasing the number of students who transfer is important, especially for students of color. I am very much concerned that much of the community college leadership has elected to respond to the controversy surrounding transfer from a color-blind point of view. Quite simply, the individuals who stand to lose most from tolerating low transfer rates are students of color, particularly Hispanics and American Indians who have traditionally used the colleges as a means to initiate college-based programs of study that lead to social and economic mobility. Underrepresented minorities are disproportionately affected by barriers to academic achievement because society has not prepared them well to either recognize or take advantage of higher education opportunities. Moreover, it is students of color who have been historically underserved by higher education. When researchers and policymakers analyze the progress minorities have made, they often seek to identify how well students are doing in different kinds of institutions. When low transfer rates are reported, and when few minorities are found to be earning bachelor's and graduate degrees, it is not surprising to find the community college transfer function at the heart of a debate between community college critics and proponents.

The Context of the Debate

One of the most frequent comments I hear goes something like this: "We should not pay attention to negative research findings about community colleges because they are, after all, the product of studies from university-based researchers who have never even set foot on a community college." Much to their chagrin, for at least 30 years, community colleges have been the targets of criticism about fulfilling their promise of equal opportunity. On the one hand, I can understand why community college leaders become outraged about this criticism. Critics of community colleges have often not been soft with their words. I have heard policymakers call transfer "a state scandal, a major failure," "an unmitigated disaster," and I have heard accusations that community colleges provide minorities with a fraudulent system of education. Yet, a college that is founded on democratic ideals is bound to be the subject of scrutiny from economists and sociologists whose job it is to examine the social infrastructures of society and their ultimate effects on the clients they purport to serve. At the heart of this close scrutiny is the colleges' transfer function, for it is precisely this function that leads to the baccalaureate, a symbolic prize that has the most potential to facilitate social and economic mobility for the poor, the disadvantaged, and people of color.

Are community colleges effective avenues for social and academic mobility? A number of university-based researchers have taken a crack at addressing this question. Clark (1960) began the debate by suggesting that community colleges cooled-out students when faculty and counselors sidetracked students with "unrealistic" expectations by channeling them into "realistic" vocational programs or permitting them to flunk out with no degree. Karabel (1972) asserted that the decline of transfer produced a class-based tracking system that closely paralleled the

stratified socio-economic tiers in the larger society. Zwerling (1976) echoed Karabel's assertions and suggested that the community college, the vehicle of opportunity, actually granted the poor a prolonged social niche, at the bottom of a diversified class structure. Astin (1975) fueled this argument by noting that students from high-income families were more likely to attend universities, while low-income students were relegated to community colleges with fewer resources and fewer benefits. Olivas (1979) proposed that community colleges were actually examples of the "dilemma of access," promoting access to higher education by inviting students to attend through their open access admissions policies, while at the same time tolerating low retention and transfer rates. Pincus (1980) attacked even the function on which community colleges pride themselves most, suggesting that vocational education was a false promise, and that in fact vocational programs offered students few economic rewards. More recently, Brint and Karabel (1990) advanced the notion that for too many students the community college will be their final contact with formalized postsecondary education. The researchers warned that: "If present trends continue, the community college may well become increasingly isolated from the rest of the system of higher education. Barely functioning transfer programs may break down altogether; already astronomical attrition rates may increase; and private corporations may, through contract training, transform what not long ago were 'comprehensive' colleges into virtual trade schools." All of these conclusions were the product of carefully designed rigorous studies and trend analyses.

Now, what has been the community colleges' response? Administrators point to special programs designed for women, minorities, and the disadvantaged. They claim, often without research data, that few students wish to transfer, and that even their dropouts may be considered successful. Administrators praise the comprehensive mission of the colleges as a source of strength and opportunity for a large segment of society that would otherwise not have an opportunity to attend college. They promote the colleges as an inexpensive and convenient way for minorities and the disadvantaged to take advantage of tech-prep programs that lead to high-paying jobs. Cohen (1978) refutes the claims against community colleges in his article, "The Social Equalization Fantasy." Cohen writes: "The question of social equalization can and should be rebutted by saying that the community colleges are no more able to overturn the class structure than the lower schools were... Their universal obligation is not to be social revolutionaries, community modifiers, educational agency brokers, or the purveyors of certificates of ever-lower value that give people the illusion that they have learned. It is to teach." So who is right? Are the university-based researchers way off mark? Should we ignore low transfer and retention rates, agree as Cohen indicates that "the colleges cannot make learned scholars of television-ridden troglodytes," and simply accept the notion that the colleges should be viewed as nothing more than a place to learn for whatever reasons? Or should we be inclined to accept Brint and Karabel's (1990) assertion that "community colleges should remain faithful to the great historic vision of creating a genuinely egalitarian system of education."

As a university-based researcher, I recognize the merits of both sides of this on-going debate. The fact that I happen to be biased toward what Dougherty (1987) calls the "class reproduction" school is not because I disdain community colleges, although I know all too well that stating my bias could easily cast me as an enemy of

the two-year college sector. But what die-hard proponents of community colleges often do not understand is that critics like me are not out to destroy community colleges. In fact, I want very much to make them better, for I know that there are thousands of students presently attending community colleges who have dreams of escaping the poverty cycle, who want more than what their parents were able (with much sacrifice) to give to them, who want to give their own children a better standard of living. But the unfortunate fact is that the defenders of community colleges and the class reproductionists rarely listen to each other, even though there is much to gain from understanding the basis of each other's arguments.

Below I advance my thinking over the most salient questions usually raised about the community colleges' transfer function, in hopes that the point of view of an Hispanic woman who attended two community colleges, earned an associate degree, transferred twice and now is a university-based researcher who conducts scholarly research on community colleges can give more than a little credibility to my views.

☞ **Why should community colleges be singled out for producing few transfer students and exhibiting low retention rates if these problems are being faced by all institutions of higher education?**

The answer is simple: community colleges are the institutions where minority, low-income, and medium-income students are concentrated (Adelman, 1989). These are the very students that society expects to cross class boundaries, and a college-based education is the ticket to the top of the academic and social ladder. As long as community colleges attract and enroll large concentrations of students of color, as well as students from poverty backgrounds, they will not escape questions of equity, outcomes, and quality. It is also well to note that four-year colleges have not escaped scrutiny. Ask any four-year college president who is dealing with issues of recruiting more minority faculty, diversifying the curriculum, improving minority recruitment, retention and graduation rates, and contending with what is now popularly known as "political correctness."

☞ **Why can't students be satisfied with earning associate degrees, especially in tech-prep programs of study that lead to high-paying jobs?**

Let's face it. Associate degrees are largely viewed as a consolation prize by a society that operates on traditional standards of academic excellence. The real prize is the bachelor's degree. As Adelman (1989) correctly points out: "The bachelor's degree is the mass benchmark of educational attainment after high school. It is a culturally visible symbol with significant power in public policy. No Congressional committee, for example, asks the U.S. Department of Education for trends in the production of Associate degrees." A few more points need to be made here. First, let us understand that if students of color who enroll in community colleges do not transfer, unless a miracle happens, they will be unable to earn bachelor's degrees. Second, we know that few minorities are earning bachelor's and graduate degrees and that in order to turn this dismal situation around, more students will have to

get into the college-prep track in high school and in the community college. Third, the highly touted tech-prep programs have yet to prove themselves with students of color. There is concern that few blacks and Hispanics are enrolled in these programs of study. True, some students, hopefully many students, will be the beneficiaries of high economic returns from earning associate degrees and they should be proud of their attainment. Yet, I assert that it is wrong to assume that enrolling in vocational and tech-prep programs or earning associate degrees are all that students of color can do. Try as it may, the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges (AACJC) has yet to succeed in convincing the power brokers of American society that they should buy into associate degrees. Again, the real prize is the bachelor's degree and the community college's transfer function is the path to attaining the prize.

☞ **Why should we worry about low transfer rates when naive community college students cannot be trusted with stating their aspirations?**

This is perhaps the most damming question raised by proponents of community colleges, for to accept the premise of this question is to tolerate shamefully low minority student retention and transfer rates. Study after study (Rendón, Justiz and Resta (1988); Cohen, Brawer and Bensimon (1985); Richardson and Bender (1987)) cite that over 50 percent of students in community colleges express an intent to transfer. Asians and Hispanics are mostly likely to cite the transfer option. Yet, transfer rates, calculation errors notwithstanding, are cited to be anywhere from 10-30 percent. Now, is it possible that these students do not know what they are talking about? Or is it possible that community colleges, even after 30 years, are continuing to "cool-out" students? I believe we have a little of both. From the vantage point of an Hispanic woman who attended a community college, I can safely say that many first generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds are very poor consumers of higher education. When I decided to go to college, I did not know which were the institutions that could give me better returns. What I wanted was to get out of poverty, to earn a bachelor's degree and to be a teacher. If some researcher had asked me at that time if I intended to transfer, I would have said, "yes," but I could also have easily said that I intended to prepare for a new job. My point is that less sophisticated students often have no notion of what they want to do with their lives. They only know that now they must do something with their lives, and often that means getting a job. But that does not mean that they would not go on to a four-year program of study if adequate financial aid was available and if faculty and counselors intervened to help clarify goals and assisted students to meet their expectations. If students are deciding in high school what to do with their lives with little guidance and support, it makes sense that their expectations could be shaped or reshaped by someone with power and influence, i.e., college teachers and counselors. When students of color come to the community college campus, they are quite vulnerable. They do not understand the costs and benefits of higher education. They do not know what it takes to transfer. They do not understand the difference between a college-prep and a vocational-technical program of study. When researchers say that we cannot trust their stated aspirations, they are partly right. But there is a great opportunity here. Students can be assisted to clarify their aspirations. They can be given all of the information and

support to make a decision they can live with for the rest of their lives. If after going through this kind of advising process, a student insists that he/she wishes to enroll in a vocational-technical program instead of a transfer program of study, then we can safely conclude that the student is making the right decision for himself or herself. But how many students go through this process? How many students enter college and drop out confused and unsure about their educational goals? My point here is that it is precisely because students are unclear about their goals and because they are poor consumers of higher education that we should worry a lot about low transfer rates.

☞ **Isn't it a mistake to say that vocational-technical programs confine students to a sub-baccalaureate track?**

Palmer (1990) has argued that vocational courses do not track students away from the baccalaureate since there is a blurred distinction between transfer and vocational courses. For instance, students in career-oriented programs such as accounting, electronics, business and health, can frequently transfer to institutions which offer these fields of study at the baccalaureate level. There is merit to the argument that many community college students enrolled in vocational-technical programs intend to transfer. However, does not this argument also logically imply that we should be seeing more students transferring from **both** transfer and vocational-technical programs? Cohen (1985) has proposed that it is actually the community education function that detracts from the transfer function. Yet, I believe that the central issue is not which community college function is to blame for low transfer rates. The real issue is whether or not students who ultimately wish to earn bachelor's degrees are finding viable opportunities to do so in community colleges.

☞ **Why should we force students to transfer if students are adults and responsible for their own choices?**

Both Palmer (1990) and Adelman (1989) have pointed to the *ad hoc* nature of community college attendance. Claiming that community college students are adults who use the colleges in "occasional" ways--enrolling in courses with no particular program of study in mind--the researchers seem to support the notion that we should accept their choice to use the colleges for whatever reasons, even if their purpose is "milling around." This argument can be quite disarming until we begin to think about it a little bit more. Not all adults are the same. One of the main differences between traditional and nontraditional students is that traditional students tend to see going to college as a natural rite of passage. Often they have a family history of college attendance and they are expected to succeed. On the other hand, nontraditional students have likely not been encouraged to attend college or told that they are capable of college-level work. Consequently, nontraditional students enroll in college facing the unknown and afraid of failure. Often, they are confused about their educational goals and long to experience some form of successful academic experience. When students of color appear to be enrolling in courses indiscriminately, they are not always purposely "milling around." In my

own study of six community colleges with large proportions of minority students (Rendón, Justiz and Resta, 1988), I found that many students did not know that they were capable of earning bachelor's degrees. One counselor told me about an Hispanic student who wanted to be a teacher, but did not think she could do it. So she enrolled in a child development program and took courses from a vocational course inventory. After the first year, she became more confident in her abilities and wanted to switch to a college transfer major, but found that many of the courses she took were not applicable for transfer. Consequently, she had to start again and take courses leading to a baccalaureate program of study. My point here is that what appears to be an example of an "occasional" use of the community college is actually an example of lack of early intervention and structured counseling and support. We should not allow this to happen. Milling around is indeed occurring, but it is not always happening because students are exercising their rights as adults. Too many students are milling around because they are confused about what it takes to reach their goals. Simply stated, students of color, as well as students from low socio-economic backgrounds, cannot afford to be milling around. The stakes are too high. They need clear, focused counseling and encouragement to pursue and attain their goals.

☞ **Shouldn't we be careful about producing too many bachelor's degrees in an already over-educated society?**

This is an example of a color-blind thinking. People of color are far from being over-educated. Let us examine the facts. According to a report released by the Quality Education for Minorities Project (1990), in 1986-87 whites comprised about 79 percent of the undergraduate enrollment, yet earned 85 percent of all bachelor's degrees. Hispanics accounted for 5.2 percent of the undergraduate enrollment, yet earned only 2.7 of the bachelor's degrees. Comparable figures for other ethnic/racial groups were: American Indians/Alaska Natives, .7 percent enrollment, .4 percent bachelor's degrees earned; Blacks, 9.2 percent undergraduate enrollment, 5.7 bachelor's degrees earned; and Asians, 3.2 undergraduate enrollment, 3.2 bachelor's degrees earned. It is also important to note that unless students of color earn bachelor's degrees, they will be unable to pursue graduate programs of study. Already, nonresident students earn proportionately more master's and doctoral degrees than Hispanic, American Indian, and Black students combined. The future is not what it used to be. Unless more students of color receive a college-based education, they will be unable to both participate in and contribute to the nation's economic development and social well-being.

☞ **Isn't it difficult and almost impossible to improve transfer rates, given the existence of multiple functions in community colleges?**

Difficult, yes. Impossible, no. We have evidence that where concerted efforts have been made to improve articulation and transfer, success has been attained (Richardson and Bender, 1985). For example, Turner (1990) found that community colleges that were organizationally set up to facilitate transfer indeed had higher rates of student transfer. Recently, I visited Palo Alto Community College, which

was created in a predominantly Mexican American community of low college participation in San Antonio, Texas. The chief student affairs officer told me that when the college was founded, transfer education was made a priority, and the general education core was focused on transfer courses. As a result, roughly 70 percent of Palo Alto's students are in transfer programs. In Arizona, close collaboration between the Maricopa Community Colleges and Arizona State University has paid off handsomely. In the Fall of 1991, ASU admitted 6,500 new freshman and 7,000 transfer students. About 36 percent of entering students at ASU are transfers. What accounts for this success? For one thing, the leadership of both the Maricopa Community Colleges and Arizona State University agreed to work cooperatively. Community college faculty serve on curriculum committees of the different colleges and schools at ASU, and a representative from ASU regularly attends the meetings of the community colleges' curriculum committee. Student services staff meet frequently to coordinate student services. In 1983, the two tiers signed an agreement to form an academic consortium to facilitate articulation and student transfer. This agreement has led to faculty exchanges, concurrent student enrollment, articulation agreements that stipulate general education requirements at both sets of institutions and electronic exchanges of student transcripts and information (de los Santos and Wright, 1989). Clearly, it is very much possible to improve the rate of student transfer if it is a priority for both parties.

Conclusion

The community college is a critical institution for students of color. It is not only a place to learn, it is a place that matters. It matters because the community college represents hope, opportunity and, for many minority and majority students, one last chance to succeed. The community college does indeed help students to cross class boundaries. Laredo Junior College and San Antonio College helped me initiate my baccalaureate work. Earning a bachelor's degree paved the way for me to earn a master's degree, which in turn, motivated me to work on a doctorate. For me, the community colleges I attended were the first gateways on the way out of the poverty cycle. Yet, more students should experience the success I have attained. More students should transfer because a college that is founded on democratic ideals and egalitarian notions of equal opportunity for all should stay on track with its founding mission. More importantly, if the community college transfer function is neglected and allowed to decline, students of color, as well as students from low socio-economic backgrounds, will be left with no alternative to initiate an education leading to a bachelor's degree. The prize will be lost, and all of society will be poorer.

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